



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE ENGLISH JOURNAL

VOLUME VIII

DECEMBER 1919

NUMBER 10

JOURNALISTIC WRITING IN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

WILLARD GROSVENOR BLEYER
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Any discussion of the teaching of journalism that is not based on a consideration of the part that the newspaper plays in democratic society will be futile, because it neglects the fundamental purpose in all training for the profession of journalism.

"The food of opinion is the news of the day," as President Wilson has happily said. The opinions of nine-tenths of the people in this country on current political, social, and economic questions are based on the news that they read in the daily press. It is the news rather than editorials that is shaping public opinion in this country today. It is the news that decides how the average American will vote. It is the news that, as far as the average voter has a voice in the matter, will determine the policy of this nation with reference to the League of Nations. A nation-wide referendum on the question of entering such a league has been seriously proposed in both houses of Congress. Practically the only knowledge that the average American citizen has on this problem is what he has gleaned from reports of the speeches and discussions at Paris and Washington, as these have been reported in the newspapers.

Who are the reporters and correspondents that are furnishing us, day by day, the food for our opinions? Are they men and

women well grounded in the fundamental principles of government and politics, of economics, and of history? Or are they writers who have only an elementary education in these fields, obtained from a high-school course, supplemented by such empiric knowledge as they have derived from some years of practical newspaper experience?

It is not too much to say that the future of this nation is being determined in a considerable degree by the day's news as it is gathered and written by our reporters and correspondents. Should we not as patriotic American citizens consider with the greatest care what the training shall be of these purveyors of the food of our opinions?

The character of that training is the subject of this paper. It is a problem very different from that of the preparation necessary for the writers of our advertisements or of our business letters, even though advertising, commercial correspondence, and journalistic writing are occasionally grouped together as "practical English." Our votes on men and measures are not influenced by the way a breakfast-food advertisement is written or by the manner in which an effective collection letter is phrased. Melville E. Stone, general manager of the Associated Press and founder of the *Chicago Daily News*, says:

To be a good reporter requires a great education. There is nothing more pitiable than the attempt of an ignoramus to write an abstract of an intelligent speech or to interpret an intelligent man's ideas in an interview. It is equally lamentable to observe a half-baked youngster struggling to report any event involving knowledge of a national or an international question. An intelligent reporter is far more valuable than an intelligent editor. It will be a great day for American journalism when this fact is generally recognized, when a public man will have some assurance that his words and acts will be fairly and intelligently presented.

What are we doing, we high-school teachers of English and we university teachers of journalism—and what are we going to do—toward training boys and girls, young men and women, to be intelligent reporters, capable purveyors of the food of opinion for nearly a hundred million American citizens?

First, realizing the fact that journalism is one of the great professions for which we may prepare our students, we must impress

upon them the professional ideal. We should show them that journalism ought to be on as high a plane, particularly in the matter of preparatory training, as are the professions of law and medicine. We must convince them that to be able to write an acceptable news story is not enough to entitle them to be full-fledged newspaper men and women. We should make them see that they need a comprehensive knowledge of the principles of economics, political science, history, philosophy, and literature, before they can interpret intelligently the events and utterances that they will be called on, day by day, to report. Professional training of the right kind does not stop with instruction and practice in the mere technique of journalistic writing. Such technique might conceivably be taught in well-equipped high schools. But what secondary schools cannot give, partly because their pupils are not mature enough, is the broad knowledge, the deep insight, the comprehensive grasp of ideas, that are fundamental for the professional journalist.

We cannot afford to let high-school boys and girls harbor the mistaken notion that, because they have developed a certain facility in writing for the school paper, they are ready, on leaving school, to enter the profession of journalism. But is not that just what we are doing, consciously or unconsciously, when we call our high-school work in journalistic writing a "course in journalism," or when we apply the term "vocational" to such a course? Would it not be quite as logical to call our instruction in physiology and first aid "courses in medicine," or our work in civics and elementary law "course in law"? Or to list physiology, first aid, and civics as "vocational" studies?

It is obviously no more the function of secondary schools to train pupils for the profession of journalism than to prepare them for the professions of law and medicine. To call any study in the high-school curriculum a "course in journalism" or to list such a course as "vocational" certainly gives the pupils and the public the impression that we are undertaking to turn out newspaper men and women.

As leaders of educational thought, we need to impress upon our students both in high school and college the fact that professional

training of university grade is as necessary for the profession of journalism as it is for other professions. By emphasizing this fact constantly we are performing, not merely a duty as educators, but a profoundly patriotic duty as citizens interested in the development of sound public opinion through the medium of the press.

But what can we high-school teachers do as our part of this professional training for journalism? First, we may develop in our students habits of observation, thought, and expression that will be invaluable for them both in their professional training and in their careers as journalists. Secondly, we may use various types of journalistic writing and our school publications, not only to bring out in students whatever talent for journalism they may possess, but also to encourage them to take up journalism as a profession.

Accuracy in observing and in recording facts is a prime requisite for the good newspaper reporter. The habit of seeing, hearing, remembering, and jotting down accurately is one that needs to be insisted on constantly from the time that pupils begin to write. Demosthenes said that the three requisites for effective oratory were, first, action; second, action; and third, action; so it may truly be said of journalism that the three essentials are accuracy, accuracy, accuracy. On the walls of the journalism lecture-room and the journalism laboratory at the University of Wisconsin is painted in large black letters the motto, "Accuracy Always." Newspapers have established bureaus of accuracy and fair play and are devising various methods of checking up names, addresses, figures, and other facts in the news stories of their reporters and correspondents in order to reduce the number of errors to a minimum and to get rid of careless, inaccurate workers.

We may teach students to observe accurately, not only in the science laboratory and in the classroom, but at the football game and the manual-arts exhibition. We may train them to hear and remember accurately what is said by speakers at our morning exercises and by persons whom they interview. The school paper may be effectively used as an additional incentive to accuracy in reporting, for when students realize that their errors will stand out

in print, where all their schoolmates will see the mistakes, they are likely to exercise great care in their writing.

To train pupils to think logically is fundamental to all teaching of composition, since clearness in writing is absolutely dependent on clearness in thinking. Loose, illogical thinking is the bane of our hurried, superficial life, as it is reflected in many of our carelessly edited newspapers. The temptation to dash off anything that seems to mean something is constant when we are rushing out edition after edition at intervals of an hour. No one is more inclined than the novice to yield to this temptation. To insist, day in and day out, that our boys and girls know exactly what they want to say before they write is the only way to combat this tendency not only of our press but of almost every activity of American life.

It may seem a homeopathic remedy to prescribe newspaper reading as a cure for loose thinking, but I believe that to set aside a few minutes every day in the school program for the discussion of the news is one of the best means of leading students to think intelligently about what they read and study. They should be encouraged to interpret the significance of a piece of news by discussing its causes, its probable results, and its relation to current movements. Every effort must be made to connect the news with what they are learning in courses in history, civics, literature, and science, so that they may be led to see current events in proper perspective against the background of their general knowledge.

Boys and girls need to be taught how to read a newspaper to the best advantage. Unless they learn to discriminate between the mere episodes, such as accidents, fires, crimes, and athletic contests, and significant events that are making history, they may go through life, as many people do, enjoying the chewing-gum of the news while the flavor lasts, and scarcely realizing that they have been neglecting the food of thought.

Every person who would write for the press must learn to express his ideas so that literally he who runs may read. That rapid reader, the average American, takes his newspapers "on the run." Statistics compiled in Chicago show that the average business man spends not over twenty minutes in reading his

newspaper. To write acceptably for such rapid readers means that the grammatical structure of every sentence must be evident at a glance and that the meaning must be absolutely clear at first reading. Ability to write quickly firm, coherent sentences with the important ideas effectively massed at the beginning, where they will catch the eye of the casual reader, can be acquired only by constant practice in high school and college.

In order to express their ideas clearly, students need to be trained to use concrete, specific words instead of vague, general, "woolly" ones. They can be shown that, as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch has well said in his book *On the Art of Writing*:

To write jargon is to be perpetually shuffling around in the fog and cotton-wool of abstract terms. So long as you prefer abstract words which express other men's summarized concepts of things, to concrete ones which lie as near as can be reached to things themselves and are the first-hand material for your thoughts, you will remain, at the best, writers at second-hand. If your language be jargon, your intellect, if not your whole character, will almost certainly correspond.

I emphasize the necessity of teaching pupils to avoid trite, general, "woolly" words, because one of the greatest faults of journalistic style is the use of "jargon." When reporters are called on day after day to write on similar events and to write at top speed, the danger is great of using over and over again the same old words and phrases, without attempting to find "the one noun that best expresses the idea, the one verb needed to give it life, the one adjective to qualify it." High-school boys and girls may be steered away from this danger if we will develop in them habits of expression that will survive the high pressure of newspaper work.

Too often students entering schools of journalism have already acquired bad habits of thinking and writing that have to be slowly and painfully eradicated before they are prepared to take up advanced journalistic work. Only by constant insistence on careful, accurate thought and expression may we hope to establish permanently in our students the right kind of habits.

By employing journalistic types of writing in every year of our high-school courses in English composition and by utilizing our

school publications as an incentive to good work, we may arouse much greater interest in writing among all of our students than by any other means. It is impossible within the limits of this paper to outline in detail the possible methods of using the various kinds of newspaper writing, but some of the general considerations governing the arrangement of the work may be given briefly.

All journalistic writing may be divided into six types: (1) news stories, including the so-called "human interest" and feature stories, (2) special-feature articles, (3) editorials, (4) criticism, dramatic and musical and book reviewing, (5) practical guidance material, such as recipes and "how-to-do-something" articles, and (6) humor, in prose and verse. Instruction and practice in all these types may be given in high-school courses in English at the appropriate time and may be used to develop good "copy" for the school publications. The order in which they should be taken up will naturally be determined by their relative difficulty and by their relation to the four forms of discourse: narration, description, exposition, and argumentation.

The narrative-descriptive news story and special-feature article may well be considered when narration and description are studied; the expository news story (particularly reports of speeches and interviews), the expository special-feature article, the recipe and the "how-to-do-something" article, as well as the expository editorials, can be used in connection with the teaching of exposition; while the editorial that aims to prove and to persuade naturally will form a part of the teaching of argumentation.

Dramatic criticism, including critiques of moving-picture plays, should come after the principles of dramatic technique have been brought out by the study of Shakespeare's plays in the fourth-year course in literature. The dialogue joke, and humor in such verse forms as the triolet and other types of *vers de société*, may well be introduced when the study of literature deals with humor and versification. The writing of recipes and practical guidance articles may be closely correlated with the pupils' work in domestic science and manual arts. In fact, the possibilities of vitalizing instruction in composition and of motivating pupils' writing by the use of different types of journalistic work are almost unlimited.

No teacher, I believe, should undertake to give instruction in these types of writing unless he or she has made an intensive study of newspaper writing and has had some practical experience in journalism. By attending one summer session at some university in which systematic instruction and practice in journalism are given, any English teacher can easily secure the necessary training and practical experience.

Because of the important part that the newspaper plays in forming and guiding public opinion, no instruction in journalistic writing is adequate which fails to emphasize the function of the press and the ethics of journalism. Students often do not realize that what they write for publication influences, directly or indirectly, every reader of the paper in which their work appears. Only when the effect of the news stories, editorials, criticism, and humor that they write for the school paper has been clearly demonstrated to them do they appreciate the power of the printed word. The responsibility of every writer for what he writes and how he writes it needs to be emphasized constantly.

In connection with the editing and publishing of school papers problems are always arising that involve the ethics of journalism. Interscholastic contests and school politics often furnish occasion for unfair, biased news stories, as do similar struggles in the world at large. To present both sides fairly is as important in school papers as it is in the daily press. We are giving students a valuable lesson in the ethics of journalism, for example, when we insist that whether their basket-ball team wins or loses the account of the game must be written up in a fair, unbiased way that gives full credit where it is due.

The newspaper profession offers no greater temptations to deviate from the straight path than do other professions, but because of the public function of the press a lapse of even the "cub" reporter may have serious consequences to society. Every newspaper reader no less than every newspaper writer should be made to realize that whenever news is faked, colored, or suppressed our food for thought is adulterated and poisoned, and we are deprived of the mental nourishment without which sound public opinion cannot exist.

In conclusion, then, let us do our part toward maintaining a high professional standard for journalism by teaching our students to discriminate between mere proficiency in the technique of newspaper writing and substantial preparation for the profession of journalism. Let us discourage them, their parents, and the public generally from assuming that, because the reporter begins at the bottom of the journalistic ladder, immature high-school graduates with a little training in newspaper writing and a little practical experience on school publications are prepared to furnish the food of opinion for hundreds of thousands of American citizens. Let us impress upon them that to be an intelligent reporter of the day's news demands a liberal education supplemented by systematic training in a school of journalism.

At the same time let us do our part toward starting boys and girls who are interested in journalistic careers on the road to their goal. Let us teach them to observe accurately; let us train them to hear and to remember accurately. Let us develop in them the ability to think logically about what they see and hear. Let us encourage them to connect what they hear and see and what they read of the day's news with what they are learning in every one of their studies.

As teachers of English, let us continue with tireless energy to show our students how to express their ideas in concise, clear-cut, concrete language that the rapid reader can understand at a glance. But above everything else let us impress upon them that only those are worthy to be leaders in shaping public opinion who have the highest ideals for themselves, for their community, for their nation, and for the brotherhood of mankind.